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Tech 2040: Are Jews Ready?

From the SAPIR Institute



MAGINE it's December 2040.

It's early in the morning, and your alarm goes off—not to the sound of a staccato ring but to the synthetic voice of your deceased grandmother, gently encouraging you to awaken. Despite the slight discomfort, you appreciate the Hanukkah

gift from your kids, who thought you might want to start the day with a bit of nostalgia powered by the latest voice-assistant device.

You sit up, instinctively reaching over to your nightstand for the virtual reality headset, and call your eldest son. You don't dial a number or voice a command. You merely think a thought, thanks to the electroencephalogram (EEG)-based brain-computer interface that enables anyone to communicate by issuing a prompt with his mind.

Your son is on his way to attend minyan in-person at a synagogue, a rare departure from his daily practice of wrapping tefillin at home in his living room, where he uses the latest augmented- or virtual-reality inter-

face to attend the same synagogue’s virtual (and more popular) structure in the metaverse. He is being driven in a fully autonomous vehicle and gesticulates wildly about the newest technological breakthrough—an AI model so novel and advanced that it can mine scientific literature for insights in ways that humans cannot.

He’s less sanguine about other developments: the mass layoffs in law and finance; the consistent decline in religious affiliation; the presidential election undermined by deepfakes; the democratic societies awash in disinformation; the AI arms race between the U.S. and China; the Start-Up Nation’s lingering association with spyware. Like *Groundhog Day*, Congress is still debating how to staunch the baleful impacts of social-media platforms.

It’s a lot for one morning. You take off your headset and take a deep breath.

You stroll down the hall to the home office and begin rummaging through a few prized possessions, ultimately stumbling upon a vintage issue of SAPIR on technology—in print, no less. Leafing through the once-crisp pages, you’re taken by the seeming simplicity of life in the 2020s. You’re also taken aback, wistful that community leadership did not, could not, or would not address the many pressing educational, theological, and mental health challenges from a generation prior.

Okay, pause. Now back to reality.

This prognostication may or may not portend our future. But if there is one undeniable takeaway from this issue of SAPIR, it is that we live in unprecedented times, on the cusp of transformative discoveries, and at an electrifying speed of change that humankind has never before experienced.

Of course, we’re not the first to encounter the seismic impact of human invention; we may, however, be the first to experience it at scale and all at once.

It took a century, according to futurist Ray Kurzweil, for the widespread adoption of the printing press; half-a-century for electricity; several decades for the telephone, radio, and television; a bit more than a decade for the PC and mobile phone; and several years for the World Wide Web (which, in April, celebrated the 30th anniversary of its public release). But it took only *two months* for ChatGPT to reach an estimated 100 million monthly users.

Ideas born today are implemented tomorrow, not decades from now. Today we have a choice, and a fighting chance, to tackle some of the major issues of our time before we are encumbered by their consequences for decades to come.

Comb through the pages of this issue of SAPIR and you will find a number of practical and pragmatic ideas where, blessed with the right vision, motivation, and resources, we can effect positive lasting change.

Here are three, for starters:

- *Jewish day schools should be at the leading edge on smartphones, social media, and mental health.* Social-media overuse and misuse might not seem particularly new. And yet, in May, the surgeon general issued a warning about the risks posed by social media to adolescent health. The American Psychological Association followed up with a health advisory. And in poll after poll—and here, in essays by Jacob J. Schacter and Rivka Press Schwartz—we see that it remains a top issue of concern for parents and educators.

What if Jewish day schools nationwide pooled their knowhow and took the lead on addressing this gnawing challenge? What if leading educators, mental health professionals, and technologists convened, workshopped, and developed a central repository of information and resources for Jewish day-school communities—administrators, parents, teachers, and kids—to partner in stymying the worst impulses of social media while elevating its pri-

mary benefits? It might lead to the implementation of a curriculum on digital hygiene and internet safety, or the proliferation of community-wide pledges to undertake certain smartphone practices, or the introduction of regular trainings for parents and teachers on recognizing problematic media use and modeling good habits.

- *Let's get ahead of the curve and prepare for life in the metaverse.* The metaverse might seem like a distant galaxy or the figment of a science fiction writer's imagination. But, as Zvika Krieger and Mordechai Lightstone discuss, this immersive virtual world is already here, and likely here to stay. Unlike social-media platforms, the metaverse is in a nascent stage. Jewish educators and communal leaders still have the opportunity to help shape the contours of this new digital universe. Doing so doesn't require one giant leap but rather a series of small steps, including *education* (read up on it!); *immersion* (try one of the consoles!); *integration* (stake a flag in this virtual realm!); and *advocacy* (conduct outreach and develop relationships with companies, policymakers, and regulators!). Jewish leaders need to enter this digital landscape with a pioneering verve: wary of the hype, mindful of the pitfalls, and keen on creating a safe and meaningful space.
- *Jewish communal leaders and Jewish technologists walk into a bar...* This isn't the beginning of a bad joke. It's the image of Jewish leadership in the 2020s and beyond, one where our best thinkers and doers grapple with the existing and emerging impacts of technology on Jewish communal life and the lives of the Jews. It can be at a bar or a *beit midrash*; the location matters less than the mere existence and eventual outcomes of a conversation that isn't yet taking place among people who work in Jewish organizations, tech companies, think tanks, and universities. As Andres

Spokoiny envisions, what if we create a common space for leading rabbis and technologists, philanthropists, and venture capitalists to interact, wrestle with ideas, and tackle the towering issues of our day? And as David Zvi Kalman imagines, what if a new think tank or R&D lab were born that grounded these substantive discussions in policy prescriptions and community programs?

Peruse this issue, and you'll delve into the ethical dimensions of autonomous weapons systems and the privacy implications of surveillance technologies. You'll discover why the future of the U.S.-Israel alliance may be predicated less on short-term threats from the Middle East and more on long-term challenges from the Middle Kingdom.

You'll grapple with the impact of technology—*l'tov v'ra*, for good and bad—on synagogues and day schools; camps and Chabad; small rural Jewish communities and vast oceans of Jewish text online; end-of-week meaning and end-of-life mourning. You'll question whether the fabled golem was the first manifestation of artificial intelligence. You'll learn why the Talmudic art of listening may be the answer to our tech-induced polarization. And you'll read about why books, like the Talmud, have long served as the “technologies of transmission” in the millennia-old story of Judaism.

You, our valued reader, might be a technophile or a Luddite, a major philanthropist or a new donor, the CEO of a legacy institution or a pulpit rabbi, a concerned parent or an entrepreneurial student. But whoever you are, you—rather, we—have a responsibility and an opportunity to throw our hats in the proverbial ring, and to fill them with ideas. Bret Stephens describes Abraham Lincoln as doing just that. I'm hard-pressed to find a more inspiring model.

“The best way to predict the future,” quipped legendary computer scientist Alan Kay, “is to invent it.”

Let's sound the alarm before 2040, and get to work. *